

Ready, Steady, Cook: The Growth of a Middle-aged Novice Researcher in the “Academic Kitchen”

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Abstract

Writing can be used to help structure reflections and gain understanding of both an individual’s approach to learning and the complex dynamic relationship between teaching and learning (Dominicé, 2000; Moon, 1999; Powell, 1985). In considering my academic enculturation experiences as a middle-aged graduate student, I apply Elbow’s (1998) “cooking” metaphor throughout this article when reflecting upon experiences that epitomize my intense personal and professional growth. Since beginning graduate studies in 2009, making sense of my previous professional roles in relation to how I am developing my skills as a researcher has been an ongoing struggle. Through exploration of the context of my knowledge acquisition and professional learning, I reveal some aspects of this struggle and how I have subsequently developed as a researcher and fledgling academic. In this article, I tell the story of how these experiences have interlaced to represent one of the most profoundly important cooking and growing periods of my life. While this article may be of interest to other students embarking upon graduate studies, it is also my hope that it will stimulate conversations among policy makers and faculty members about how best to support individuals who come to graduate studies at a later stage in life.

Introduction

During the hurly-burly of life, and in particular, life as a graduate student, finding opportunities to pause and deeply reflect upon personal development and professional growth can be challenging. Reading Elbow's *Writing Without Teachers*, was the initial prompt I needed. However, to facilitate this process of deep reflection, some effort has been required on my part. Cranton (2006) described how any strategy that challenges an individual's existing conventions, encouraging new perspectives, and introducing new viewpoints, has the potential to foster reflection and transformation. There are a number of strategies an individual may take to aid reflection. Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1985) described a three-step process of (a) returning to the experience, (b) attending to feelings, and (c) re-evaluating experience. Through this three-stage process, Boud et al. recommended *association* as a strategy to connect ideas and feelings that were part of the original experience with new feelings that have occurred through the process of reflection.

Writing can be used to help structure reflections and gain an understanding of an individual's approach to learning and the complex dynamic relationship between teaching and learning (Dominicé, 2000; Moon, 1999; Powell, 1985). As explained by Wenger (1998), human engagement in the world is first and foremost a process of negotiating meaning together with forming an understanding of how our experiences and their contexts shape each other. As I sought a way to structure my own reflections upon my experiences of being a middle-aged graduate student, I was inspired by the work of Peter Elbow (1998), who, in his text *Writing Without Teachers*, described writing as a process of growing and cooking. As I read Elbow's representations, I was amazed by the similarity between learning to cook and becoming a novice researcher. Elbow advised that there were no easy rules to follow in the process of becoming an accomplished writer as no two pieces of writing would be similar, and each writer's growth cycle would be individual and distinct. Thus, Elbow reasoned, "the main thing you must do if you want to help growing happen in your writing is to try to get a feel for the organic, developmental process" (pp. 42-43). Through exploration of the milieu (my academic kitchen) within which my "personal knowledge acquisition" (Eraut, 1994, p. 30) and professional learning take place, I have begun to reveal how I have grown as a researcher and developed as a novice academic. Likewise, Mezirow (2000) highlighted the importance of being able to critically examine habitual expectations, revise them, and act from a revised perspective for transformative learning to transpire. Through Elbow's (1998) process of growing, cooking is a sub-component and is a useful lens to examine how growth and transformation have occurred. Through a progression of "bubbling, percolating, fermenting, chemical interaction, and atomic fission. Cooking drives the engine that makes growing happen" (p. 48).

The purpose of drawing upon similarities with Elbow's (1998) work was to communicate my experiences and reflections of being a graduate student and fledgling researcher. Since I commenced graduate studies in 2009, making sense of my previous professional roles in relation to how I am developing my skills as a researcher has been an ongoing struggle. Returning to graduate studies after some years in the workplace was "anxiety-provoking" (Cranton, 2006, p. 5), as I found myself re-learning writing, reading, and time-management skills. Life as a graduate student was much like the process of writing as cooking that Elbow (1998) described as:

One piece of material (or one process) being transformed by interacting with another: one piece of material being seen through the lens of another, being dragged through the guts of another, being reoriented or reorganized in terms of the other, being mapped onto the other. (p. 49)

As a middle-aged woman, who previously held managerial roles in education and has transitioned to a novice scholar working alongside experienced faculty, I mirrored the trainee chef who gazes enviously at their accomplished masters brandishing razor-sharp knives with precision. Reflecting upon my graduate studies to date, I am mindful of the moments of frustration when it seemed that I only produced burnt offerings and moments when all of the ingredients conspired to produce an immensely satisfying dish. There have been periods when I have grappled with the most fundamental questions about my work, and I have not been able to see how I could advance. There have also been the tiny flashes of brilliance when my dreams became reality. In this article, I reflect on experiences that epitomize my profound personal and professional growth.

In searching for a way to share my experiences with an academic audience, my writing has adopted an autoethnographic stance. Goodall (2000) described how autoethnography allowed the researcher to create narratives shaped by personal experiences within particular cultural contexts that are addressed at academic and public audiences. Through autoethnography, I am able to use my experience and introspections as a primary data source to gain insight into the larger culture of graduate studies (Patton, 2002).

Entering the Kitchen

Early in September of 2009, I stood in the car park outside the Faculty of Education and gazed at my surroundings. I sensed the potential of beginning a graduate studies program and becoming rejuvenated in my middle age, just as the temptations of a desert menu might revive a waning appetite. The walls outside the faculty building were grey, foreboding walls that framed an entrance where many graduate students had walked before. I remember being filled with a potent mixture of eagerness and nerve-fuelled adrenaline. I recall wondering whether this faculty building would ever feel like “home”.

The early days were a blur of transition as I moved back and forth between the roles of parent, partner, new immigrant, and student. Compton, Cox, and Santos Laanon (2006) recognized this process as being common for many graduate students as they begin to negotiate the many competing interests for their time, attention, and energy. There were certainly many times when I was watching numerous pots and pans simultaneously coming to boil.

At the very beginning of graduate studies there was no formal “first day”, and I remember feeling rather relieved that I had made a visit to the faculty the year previously; at least I knew the location of the library and my classes. Attending several “meet and greet” events were helpful in orientating me to the expectations of my new role as a graduate student, and more importantly, these events allowed me to become familiar with my peers. I sensed mixed emotions emanating from my peers: a beginning comprehension of the energy and commitment that would be needed for navigation and growth within the graduate program. My thoughts of rejuvenation were carefully placed on the back burners.

Reflecting now on what it felt like to begin graduate studies, my description contains two significantly different flavours. First, there was an adjustment to a new environment, work ethic, and the norms and expectations that come from being introduced into a new institutional organization. This flavour was social, where it was necessary to have many surface level interactions and inquiries with both my peers and the information framework that was provided by university administrators. More significant perhaps was the second flavour; an adjustment to the autonomous and often isolated process I experienced as I transformed as a new scholar, a feeling seemingly shared by Trujillo (2007) through his description of how becoming a researcher was “to some extent a lonely path” (p. 2).

Commencing life as a graduate student was certainly a different experience from undertaking my undergraduate degree where a formal induction process provided the scaffolding for new students. The initiation into the doctoral program was different from being initiated into the workplace, an experience I had undergone with several different employers in various professional contexts where orientation processes were planned and structured. In essence, becoming a graduate student illustrated how my age and previous experience would not mitigate my need to develop and grow into the role of research and scholarly activity. I was a novice with much to learn. This message was transmitted on various levels and through many sources, such as my supervisor, professors, and from interactions with faculty members at conferences. This message that I was a novice researcher became loud and clear by the end of the first semester.

Learning to Navigate the “Academic Kitchen”

New topics and classes quickly immersed me in this unfamiliar environment. When I spoke for the first time in each class there was instant recognition that my accent was distinctive, and my vocalizations were setting me slightly apart from other students. Within my previous “commonplace” professional role I had

established social connotations that were now challenged, as I had not considered that I would *sound* different from new colleagues and peers. In the graduate classroom, a level of interaction between learner and learning is highly desirable, and Elbow (1998) highlighted how the “original, commonest, easiest-to-produce kind of interaction is that between people” (p. 49). To achieve my learning needs I interacted by vocalizing my thoughts and opinions. This was important for personal and professional reasons. Being middle-aged seemingly brought the advantage of experience and assumed confidence, but I was unsure in this new environment, and I was uneasy with my distinctive dialect and novice contributions. My familiar job title and seniority within my educational management role, and level of organizational responsibility were now in the past. My need to adjust was significant.

Brookfield (1986) described the “transactional dialogues” of an adult learning environment as a necessary process of learners and teachers being “engaged in a continual process of negotiation of priorities, methods, and evaluative criteria” (p. 20). I had lived this theory in my previous life with my adult students. I have always seen myself as a facilitator whose role included presenting students with diverse ways of thinking and investigating. However, I discovered it had seemed easier to live by this mantra when I was in a familiar and comfortable context. I successfully negotiated transition periods previously; periods when the newness of a role or experience brings discomfort together with a level of anxiety about individual contributions or performance. But these moments had always been negotiated within a familiar milieu. I now found myself in a unique situation. I needed to “cook” before I could begin to “grow” professionally as a chef. I began with small, simple dishes carefully using my energy to form new perceptions and insights about myself (Elbow, 1998) that would nurture my growth as a novice researcher in my academic kitchen.

Elbow (1998) recognized that “it is the characteristic of living organisms, cell creatures, to unfold according to a set of stages that must come in order” (p. 43). The order began for me in the classroom composed of classmates who were mostly younger and who had been educated or employed in the local university in the province. I was reminded of their home advantage on several occasions; for example, in *Policy Studies* they were familiar with local policy, whereas I drew on my previous life, experiences from a nation that now seemed largely irrelevant.

Trujillo (2007) described how graduate students often report feeling their self-esteem is challenged at the start of their program where the social environment feels new and highly competitive. Subsequently, graduate students find themselves increasingly seeking comparison information from each other as a way to cope with the initial demands of graduate studies. In the same way that cooking is about interaction, about experimenting how ingredients might blend or taste together, my development as a graduate student and novice researcher began to move forward through interactions. Through discourse with peers I established shared understandings, and where I heard a difference in my voice they heard something of interest. Similar to Elbow (1998), I was able to engage in discussion with other students who had similar experiences. This interaction helped me understand and recognize that other students also encountered similar internal conflicts.

Early on in the first semester, the opportunity came for me to execute my first attempt at producing applications for external funding for my studies. At first, constructing one or two pages of proposed research did not seem too arduous. However, my ideas were at best tentative; my skills at writing a proposal were non-existent, and the results disappointed me. Internally I could visualize my proposal, a dish of sublime intensity that any chef would be proud to serve. Sadly, the reality was a rather boring cheese sandwich, with stale bread and bland cheese, and the overall taste immediately forgettable. This experience would be the beginning of an ongoing struggle with writing, a struggle that shaped my academic program, causing many sleepless nights, tears of frustration, and only occasional small bites of revelation and joy.

Tasting the Sour and the Sweet

During my winter semester I had my first significant taste of the skills I would need to develop as a novice researcher as I undertook my first research assistantship. From the initial meeting onwards, the rich research experiences of my colleagues filled the small gathering room with weighty expectations. I felt a

strong sense of what Golde (1998) described as four generalization tasks that graduate students grapple with: Can I do this? Do I want to be a graduate student? Do I want to do this work? Do I belong here? The many hours spent in that room proved to be an axis on many levels as my increasing enthusiasm for investigation facilitated my development of rudimentary research skills. At the same time, I traversed growing responsibilities within graduate studies, tried desperately to become a stronger writer, and organize my family life outside of the program. The chaos of managing life, inside and outside of graduate school, was like the feeling of observing numerous pans simultaneously coming to boil.

The Sour

Receiving acceptance for my first academic conference was a moment of great elation. Creating the proposal was a cautious process of drafting and editing—trying to work through an iterative process to develop my ideas. Elbow (1998) described cooking as the process of writing “words on paper so as to permit an interaction between you and not-you. You are building someone to talk to” (pp. 55-56). The process described by Elbow involves two stages: the first where you write out your words and the second where you place distance between the words and subsequently revisit, interact with, and react to them. Schön (1987) described how reflection of earlier actions could begin a dialogue of thinking and doing, through which an individual becomes more skillful. I see now that the second stage described by Elbow (1998) required more knowledge and skill than I had at that moment in time. The interaction and reaction came from my discussant in the conference rather than from anything I could produce internally. Watching a cooking show on mainstream television where one of the objectives seems to be for the master chef to completely humiliate the trainees, exemplifies how I felt after being subjected to my discussant’s feedback. The experience was somewhat traumatic and left a sour taste in my mouth.

The Sweet

My second conference followed a few weeks later, a presentation of the research group’s work, and the responsibility of presenting were shared with trusted colleagues. The feedback was positive, and the experience was completely different this time. The moment tasted sweet. These two contrasting conference experiences exposed me to the academic juxtaposition of success and failure, recognition and critique. My experience of the first conference was a setback to my self-esteem, and though it is relatively normal for self-esteem to be affected in an adverse way at the commencement of graduate studies (Trujillo, 2007), negative self-esteem had been an issue for me prior to beginning doctoral studies, so this was particularly difficult. However, the second conference began to mitigate the detrimental effect of the first conference and allowed me to experience both the lows and the highs of academia.

My interactions with peers proved to be an invaluable source of guidance through these conflicting experiences. Through the sharing of our stories I began to see low points that could be used to instigate further thinking and learning, and high points could be seen as milestones in the graduate studies process. Success and failure can take many forms during graduate studies and has been representative of my struggles to cook and grow with my scholarly writing and the honing of research skills. Elbow (1998) has a universal piece of advice for all cooking and growing:

Almost always it is good to use extremes and let moderation arrive eventually. Being in the middle is being stuck, barren, held between the opposites. When there are cycles to be gone through, do each other to the extreme—keep yourself from being caught in the middle. You can’t be a good, ruthless editor unless you are a messy rich producer. But you can’t be really fecund as a producer unless you know you’ll be able to go at it with a ruthless knife. (p. 60)

Becoming a messy rich producer has required pushing myself beyond my comfort zone—to take risks as I have struggled to cook and grow. However, by embracing diverse experiences, I have been provided with many opportunities to appreciate both success and failure. As I have increased my repertoire of skills and my recipes have become increasingly complex, I have begun to recognize when I need to brandish the knife and simplify the dish. When I have needed it, I have found courage to continue to explore my academic kitchen.

Cooking Alongside Other Chefs

As I began to become familiar with my co-researchers and undertook additional research assistantships, I gained knowledge and confidence in the research process through my integration in the sociocultural practices of these groups. Lave and Wenger (1991) called this process *legitimate peripheral participation*, and suggested that it provided “a way to speak about the relations between newcomers and old-timers, and about activities, identities, artifacts, and communities of knowledge and practice” (p. 29). As a newcomer to the community of practice of both graduate studies and the broader milieu of academia, I began learning new social and knowledgeable skills from the periphery of my field. Gradually my learning and sense-making from my learning were configured through my increasing participation in the sociocultural practices of my research assistantships (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

My research assistantships were similar to an *apprenticeship*, and observing and interacting with faculty and fellow students who were in the advanced stages of graduate studies provided rich learning opportunities. Austin (2002) suggested that holding research assistantships provides students with research experience that lead to increased confidence “in their ability to frame research questions, design studies, and write for publication” (p. 105). I agree that my research assistantship provided a vehicle for an increase in confidence; however, undertaking the research assistantship was not in and of itself representative of the entirety of my experience. I believed that the research assistantship was particularly beneficial due to its nature of being an apprenticeship that provided opportunities for me to learn and enhance research skills within a community of practice. Through my direct involvement with research activities, carefully overseen and facilitated by faculty members, my understanding and skills developed in a way described by Lave and Wenger (1991) as learning “how masters talk, walk, work, and generally conduct their lives; how people who are not part of the community of practice interact with it; what other learners are doing; and what learners need to learn to become full practitioners” (p. 95).

Elbow (1998) stated that people grow by going through “a series of changes and end up more complex and organized than when they start out” (p. 22), and that growth can cause an individual to shift, change perspective, and begin to see things differently. Adult learning theory has revealed how throughout a lifetime, individuals make meaning out of their experiences, and this understanding is often acquired through a process of self-reflection (Cranton, 2006). Making meaning through reflection will not necessarily allow an individual to recognize the change and transformation described by Elbow (1998). Mezirow (1991) proposed that for reflective learning to become transformative existing “assumptions or premises are found to be distorting, inauthentic, or otherwise invalid” (p. 6).

Ingredients

Graduate studies provided me with numerous opportunities to reflect from lectures, classes, workshops, and interactions with my iterations of ideas, actions, and thinking. It was difficult to estimate whether any of these individual reflections have been truly transformative; however, as I have experienced them in their totality, I have been transformed. My research assistantships were certainly a key ingredient for professional growth, but the smörgåsbord of my transformation was in the combination and interaction of its numerous ingredients. The recipe of classes, advancing interests, writing, establishing my voice, critique, mentoring, university service, workshops, interactions with faculty, and many other ingredients that have gone into the graduate study mixing bowl to create a delicious formula that is gradually helping me to transition into a more experienced academic.

The role of my peers was an equally important ingredient, and the collegial nature of the Faculty of Education fostered an informal culture of mentoring amongst the graduate students. My perspectives about mentoring prior to graduate studies were concentrated upon the role of influence, role modeling, and shared stories of how past mentors had inspired me. My view of mentoring has shifted dramatically and is no longer centered on the power relationship of expert providing council to the novice (Jipsey & Paley, 2000). Instead mentoring is reciprocal, mutual, and interconnected, a development that happens through

working alongside each other through the complexities and intensities of graduate studies, committed to simply helping each other out.

Graduate studies can be a self-contained experience (Trujillo, 2007); however, my experience includes a significant social input as well. As I worked closely alongside other graduate students and we became familiar with each other, our relationships shifted from being peers and colleagues to becoming good friends. I recall sharing stories with another graduate student who had children close in age to mine and we savoured the opportunity to recall our children's development over time, each of us recalling memories of stolen kisses, grazed knees, and tiny shoes. I remember the meetings in their homes, potluck suppers, drinking whiskey, and countless times of feeling overcome with laughter at each other's exploits. As I reflect, I see how these experiences laid a foundation that made me feel grounded. Our safe and autonomous space provided a context for many insights that helped me to understand my development as a graduate student and novice researcher.

Throwing it all in the Pot and Turning up the Heat

Presently, I see my current position in the academic kitchen as standing in front of the stove with stirring spoon in hand. Attempting to see myself with clarity, I begin by calling upon the various portions of feedback that have punctuated my graduate studies. Feedback given on progress of the degree within graduate studies can be ambiguous, and depending upon relationships with your supervisor, grades received in classes sometimes seem to be your only indication of progress (Trujillo, 2007). Course evaluations and feedback provided in some classes has been both vague and poorly timed. In the same way that adding the spice too late in the cooking process prevents the robust flavour from developing, formative feedback received at the end of the course can become largely irrelevant. Equally, I benefitted from feedback that was rich and flavorful and prompted and nudged me to become increasingly confident in attempting to inquire, investigate, write, and present my work. I realize that in the same way that feedback can be good and bad, so can an individual's writing and research activities. Elbow (date) explained:

A person's best writing is often all mixed up together with his worst. It all feels lousy to him as he's writing, but if he will let himself write it and come back later he will find some parts of it are excellent. (p. 69)

Elbow's description of the good and bad of writing resonates with much of my overall graduate studies experience. Amongst the good and bad feedback, decent and poor writing, rejected and accepted papers, classes full of the brightest moments of learning and inspiration, and the classes where I struggled to make sense of my learning, my experiences were beneficial and welcomed me to the scholarly activities of the academic kitchen. Following Elbow's recommendation of returning to my experience as a developing researcher, I understood that it was impossible to achieve the delectable entrées without also accepting the tasteless unforgettable disasters. Learning to acknowledge critical review of my work has fostered some small level of resilience, but, most importantly, has advanced my thinking and confidence through the sampling and digestion of suggested recipe adjustment.

As I stir my latest recipe, this article, I search the areas of the academic kitchen that remain undiscovered. Teaching a number of classes in my role as a teaching assistant and course instructor revealed cupboards in my kitchen that continue to be unexplored, groceries that are unpacked, and store cupboard ingredients I have not yet experimented with. In the remainder of my program I will further investigate and continue to inquire and experiment with adding seasoning and spice to my cooking through expanding my responsibilities. I will continue to interact with those in the locale of my kitchen.

The Emergence of the Investigative Chef

In writing this article, time has passed and we are slowly easing once more into a new season. Every day that I park my car outside the Faculty of Education my surroundings still capture my attention. Graduate study continues to provide me with challenging dishes to concoct. My kitchen provides a nuanced environment where I constantly adjust the recipes in temperature or seasoning. This is similar to the

challenges and accomplishments that I faced during my studies. Sometimes the adjustments are significant, but mostly they are subtle, and it is only when engaged in deep reflection that I am able to savour the robust flavours. But, occasionally, the dishes seem sublime, the aroma enticing, and I am again reminded of the promise of rejuvenation. Do I feel rejuvenated by graduate studies? My answer must be yes. Graduate studies has provided me with numerous new and exciting opportunities for professional experiences as a fledgling academic, which in turn has spawned immense personal and professional growth.

The past five years of graduate studies have increasingly embellished my kitchen. As I have struggled to formulate each new recipe I have accomplished the acquisition and utilization of new tools and ingredients. Like any new chef, I began with essentials: the pots, pans, knives, and rudimentary ingredients. However, as I have moved through the many stages of graduate studies, I have found myself increasingly confident in my ability to produce the splendid food and outstanding repertoire expected of a successful chef.

Graduate studies provided the most intensely satisfying and rich learning periods of my life, a passage of time when I have practiced cooking many recipes, acquiring the necessary nuances and refinements to create flavourful dishes. As I have reflected on my progression, and sought understanding of how challenges have been faced, my sense of development as a middle-aged novice researcher is strongly linked to feeling of rejuvenation. Graduate studies have instilled in me a tremendous motivation to continue my academic career, and I hope that sharing my experiences will encourage other graduate students to explore, cook, and grow within their own academic kitchens.

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